

# Misleading Labels

**ARE “HEALTHIER” FOODS REALLY HELPING YOU GET HEALTHY?...**

*by Linda Fiverson*

How do you decide what to buy when you're in the supermarket? Do you go in with a prefabricated list and stick to it or do you survey aisles looking for items of interest? What motivates you to buy one product and not another? Is it the attractive packaging? The “healthy” name and proclamations it makes? Prior experience with a particular brand's other products? A review of the nutritional content?

Perhaps you've never really thought about the reasons you select certain products and not others. You're going to have an opportunity to do that now because I am going to give you some “food for thought”...

You've heard the expression, “You are what you eat” many times. You've probably even heard it from me because I believe that we really ARE what we eat!! The food we eat directly impacts the way we look and feel as well as how healthy and energetic we are. The desire for good health is a relevant and growing concern in today's world and one of the ways to achieve optimal health is by making informed food choices.

I am sure that everyone knows the value of eating fruits and vegetables in their daily diet. I am also sure that many more people look at the nutritional labels of store bought products than in the past. The question I need to ask, however, is “Do you know what you should be looking for?” To make sure, let's explore some varied scenarios.

Just pretend for a minute that you're in the supermarket now in front of a popular kid's cereal. The color and picture are inviting making you want it and at the same time, not wanting your kids to have it. Guess what, though? It says right up front that it's a good source of Calcium and Vitamin D. It also says “Whole Grain Guaranteed”. Maybe you'll buy it after all – but wait – further down the aisle is a really healthy cereal. It spells out healthy starting with its very name!! It also says “Whole Grain” and boasts of mega doses of fiber. “It must be the better choice,” you think. The operative word here is “think”. If you compare the ingredients of both cereals you may be surprised to find out they're both very similar even in the fact that they both list sugar as the number one ingredient! Furthermore, if you look at the Nutrition Facts you'll interestingly find that the kid's cereal has 50 calories less per cup, significantly less sodium and half as many carbohydrates. Pretty amazing, isn't it?

While you're in that same aisle, why not look at the hot oatmeal too? There seems to be a “healthier choice” for whichever type you look at. Of course you probably would choose the one that has 50% less sugar, wouldn't you? Did you ever wonder why the regular one bears the Smart Choice sticker and the “healthier” one doesn't? It should be a bit perplexing that it is also the choice that meets the American Heart Association's “food criteria for saturated fat and cholesterol for healthy people over the age of 2. When you read the ingredient portion of the label, the first five are identical in both the regular and 50% less sugar oatmeals. What is the message we should be getting?

If you want to put my words to the test plan on spending some time examining the packaging in your local supermarket (or a not so local one if that's your preference).

For starters, note how many cereals bear the “Smart Choice” designation. Many items have the well known white sticker with the green check mark right up front, hoping to guide (or really misguide) your food selections... Just this past October, 2009 the FDA said they will begin analyzing labels to make sure they aren’t misleading. Better yet, they are hoping to develop a national standard for all manufacturers to follow. This has to be a good thing when you consider there are health-endorsed foods that contain 40% sugar!

Advocacy groups support the FDA’s endeavor to design and implement a national standard for the front of package labeling. There are numerous other items that bear the “smart choice” emblem despite their high percentages of sugar, trans fats, food coloring and other artificial additives.

Many food products boast that they have “No Sugar”. That might be true but I guarantee you they have a lot of fat! It’s the reverse theorem of “No Fat”... Something has to be added in exchange for something that was removed. Take a look at Fat Free Half and Half when you pass through the refrigerator aisle. It says “Fat Free” in large letters but then, under the ingredients it says “Adds a trivial amount of fat” referring to the ingredient “cream”. How can something be fat free if it contains any fat – even a trivial amount? And once again, the first ingredient is sugar.

Did you know that items that are fat free are usually chock full of sugar? We might be so taken with the “Fat Free” label on the front of the package that we didn’t think to also check the back label. Or, perhaps we did check and are now confused? Or should I say, deceived? Sure, we’re educated but there’s still more we need to know...like the fact that *sugar* can be disguised as many different things. A few of many examples of sugar’s names are *high fructose corn syrup*, *dextrose*, *corn syrup solids*, *cane juice*, *brown sugar (sounds healthier than white?)*, *maltodextrin* and *sucrose*; and that’s only a sampling from the list!

Manufacturers distribute the sugars in the ingredient list by spreading them out and using various forms so there is less of each particular one and consumers are thrown off guard. Remember that a product’s ingredients are always listed in their order of proportion in the food and the ones with the largest amounts are listed first, descending in order so that the one with the least amount is listed last.

Other labels which will draw your attention and hopefully cause you to question them are *Cardiologist Endorsed*, *Whole Grain*, *All Natural*, *Clinically Proven*, *Reduced Calorie*, *Good Source*, *Enriched*, *Fortified*. Believe me when I say there is a whole liturgy of them. We have been conditioned to believe the bold print that cries out to us from the front covers of grocery products but the buck has to stop somewhere. How about here? And now? Let’s re-learn our habits and make healthy choices our priority. We need to read the smaller print in the back too!

These labeling ploys apply to products in every food category. Take cookies, crackers and bread for instance. How healthy does “100% Whole Grain” sound? Healthy enough to make many a shopper reach forward and drop the item with this claim into their cart. How many of these consumers noticed the small, finer print which reads, “Made with” before “Whole Grain”? Although it might indeed contain whole wheat flour, we have no idea how much. Additionally, its nutrients are lost during processing and other highly refined grains are added in along with various synthetic vitamins and other not-so-healthy supplements.

Let’s take a peak in the bread aisle... Before you grab the “Whole Grain” bread, take a longer look at the item in your hand. Is there a chance it doesn’t really say Whole Grain” but “Whole Grain White” instead? Sometimes words play tricks on us and we see what we expected to see. In actuality, this product is barely different than the regular White Bread variety. Its ingredients and nutrition facts are very similar!

Maybe you like a quick breakfast, lunch or snack that you can throw in the

microwave and eat in a few minutes. Check out the sandwich and pocket selections in the freezer compartment. Once again, you'll see regular versions and presumably "healthier" versions. They might say "Lean", "Light" or something similar. Calorie-wise they're very similar once again. They might have less fat but they also have a lot more cholesterol, sodium and sugar! As you process this, note also that the regular version advertises 0 g Transfat but the "healthy" one doesn't. The regular product is the only one that says "Good source of protein" but both variations have the exact same picture and content description. How can that be?

We can move on from here to other aisles in the store... We'll find soups over-diluted to make them appear healthier and less fatty and juices claiming to equal a whole fruit when the fruit's nutrients have been totally depleted during processing. In the pasta aisle we find boxed Macaroni and Cheese with a laundry list of ingredients we can't even identify and guess what? Some of them have the "Smart Choice" sticker!!! I bet that gets your mind moving!!

You may expect a change of course when you enter the "Health Food" corridor or section of your store. Unfortunately, many of the products found here are not above scrutiny. Amongst other things, you will probably see an array of "Nutrition Bars" – in as many different brands and flavors as names they are called. Some of these include protein bars, meal replacement bars, energy bars, balance bars and diet bars. Many look at this as a healthy "meal on the run" because it can be slipped into a pocket and guzzled at a later time, requiring no preparation or special care. Check out the first five ingredients on some of the best selling bars; maltitol syrup, water, milk protein concentrate, fractionated palm kernel oil and unsweetened chocolate. Is that enough protein to be labeled a "protein bar"? Take responsibility -- The same rules apply to these bars as everything else! READ the labels very carefully -- you might just be buying an expensive candy bar...

Did you know that the FDA defines trans-fat-free as less than 0.5 gram per serving? That means it can be rounded down to zero and not reported or even counted as an ingredient. That may not seem like a lot and it really isn't but it can add up if you eat a few helpings of the product.... Insignificant doesn't mean it doesn't exist and not reporting it gives the false impression that there are no trans fats in the item when there really are – even in negligible amounts.

When you think about it "the ball is really in the consumer's court". Manufacturers use many different loopholes to make illusory claims to help boost their sales. They're pretty savvy aren't they? Just think how savvy you can be too. Read the print and use what you know to your advantage. "What you see isn't always what you get"!

**Linda Fiveson is a Nutritionist in Syosset, N.Y. In addition to counseling she sells her own line of foods which are all free of flour, gluten, sugar and preservatives. For more information call 516-496-2300 or visit her website at [www.lindafiveson.com](http://www.lindafiveson.com)**